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WASHINGTON, DC - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom today expressed serious concern over the future of seven imprisoned leaders of the Iranian Baha'i community. According to the Iranian Student News Agency, the seven are accused of "espionage for Israel, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic republic." Their trial is scheduled for next week and the penalty for such actions is death.

The accusation of "spying" against these five men and two women is contrived, and has been used as a pretext to persecute Baha'is for more than three quarters of a century. Since the early 1930s, the Iranian government has accused the Baha'is of being tools of Russian imperialism, British colonialism, American expansionism and most recently, of Zionism.

The international headquarters of the Baha'i faith is based today in Haifa, Israel, as a result of the banishment of the faith's founder, Baha'u'llah, by the Persian and Ottoman empires in the mid-19th century.

"It is disappointing that the Iranian government is demonstrating that it will use any pretext, however baseless, to harass and detain those whose religious beliefs differ from those enforced by the state," said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. "Iran has stated publicly its desire to begin a new dialogue with the United States and the international community, but sadly, its disregard for its own citizens' most fundamental rights continues to flout international standards."

Due process, something to which Iran is committed as a signatory of the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is absent from this case. The seven Baha'is, who have

been in prison since March and May of last year, do not have access to their legal counsel, Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Laureate. Ebadi herself has been harassed and threatened since taking their case, and in late December, Iranian authorities shut down her Center of Human Rights Defenders.

The Iranian Constitution formally recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities, yet such legal language fails to shield them from repression. And the Baha'is lack even the veneer of legal protections and are viewed as "heretics" by Iranian authorities, and may face repression on the grounds of "apostasy."

In the fall of 2008, the Iranian parliament began the process of finalizing a newly proposed penal code that would enforce the death penalty for "apostasy." If passed, it would seriously endanger the lives of all converts from Islam. It could also be applied against members of the Baha'i faith even though they are not converts from Islam, because they are considered "apostates" by the Iranian government.

At present, approximately 40 Baha'is are in prison solely because of their religious beliefs. They are part of a faith community with more than 300,000 adherents, the largest non-Muslim minority in Iran, yet the Iranian government has stripped them of any legal standing. Since 1979, Iranian government authorities have killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders in Iran, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs.

"During the early 1980s, some members of the Baha'i leadership in Iran were similarly charged with espionage, swift trials were held without due process, and within days after convictions, several were summarily executed," Gaer said. "The international community must send a strong, united signal that such violations of religious freedom will not be tolerated. U.S. and foreign leaders should call at the highest levels for the release of all persons imprisoned in Iran because of their religious beliefs and draw attention to the need to hold Iranian authorities accountable in specific cases where severe violations have occurred."

Last year, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom called on the U.S. government to "work within its current overall policy framework to ensure that violations of freedom of religion and belief, and related human rights, are included in any multilateral or bilateral discussions with the Iranian government."